

August 16, 2005

Honorable Michael O. Leavitt
Secretary
Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Leavitt:

As you know, methamphetamine (meth) abuse is the number one concern for many communities around the nation. That is why we were alarmed to learn that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) was listed as a primary sponsor of a conference hosted by the Harm Reduction Project and the Harm Reduction Coalition, organizations that support tacit legalization of drugs, including meth. The conference is scheduled be held August 19 and 20, 2005 in Utah.

Meth is an extremely dangerous and highly addictive drug. The effects of meth use can include addiction, psychotic behavior, and brain damage. Because the drug is so highly addictive, meth users who try to abstain from its use often suffer extreme withdrawal symptoms that include depression, anxiety, fatigue, paranoia, aggression, and intense cravings for the drug. Chronic meth use can cause violent behavior, anxiety, confusion, and insomnia. Users can also exhibit psychotic behavior including auditory hallucinations, mood disturbances, delusions, and paranoia, possibly resulting in homicidal or suicidal thoughts. Use of meth can cause damage to the brain that is similar to damage caused by Alzheimer's disease, stroke, and epilepsy. A single in utero exposure to methamphetamine during fetal development induces long term damage to the brain and increases the risk of long term abnormal motor development, according to recent research.

Nationwide, 7.6 percent of high school students surveyed in 2003 as part of the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) reported using methamphetamine during their lifetimes. During 2003, 5.8 percent of college students and 8.9 percent of young adults (ages 19-28) reported using methamphetamine at least once. According to preliminary data from the Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (ADAM) Program, a median of 4.7 percent of adult male arrestees and 8.8 percent of adult female arrestees tested positive for methamphetamine at the time of arrest in 2003.

These statistics do not include the hundreds of children and families who have been negatively impacted by this deadly drug. Thousands of children across the country have been taken away from their meth-abusing parents, placed with relatives or shifted into already overloaded foster care systems. Scores have been injured, a dozen or more killed; and thousands more have been born with traces of meth in their bodies.

Congress is currently working to address the dangers of meth, and we believe that the federal government should be doing everything possible to interrupt production, distribution and use and to care for those who are already affected.

According to the agenda of the "1st National Conference on Methamphetamine, HIV, and Hepatitis Science & Response," there are several sessions planned that are wholly inappropriate and contrary to commonly accepted norms related to drug abuse prevention and treatment. It is appalling to us that HHS would support such an agenda.

In a write up in the August 12, 2005 edition of the *Washington Blade*, Michael Shernoff, who is scheduled to present at the conference, said current anti-meth campaigns aren't effective and that harm reduction is a more reasonable path toward change. "Meth equals death; I don't think is a good campaign. I don't think it's going to stop someone from using meth." "For a lot of people, meth use is a rite of passage and it really does increase sexual pleasure." The article goes on to state that "Shernoff said current safer sex messages that promote condom use in each sexual encounter are no longer effective. Harm reduction techniques, such as strategic positioning or making sure the HIV positive sexual partner bottoms, may be a better message for preventing HIV infections, he said."

It is outrageous that the federal government would be supporting any efforts that convey meth use as "a rite of passage" and condomless sex as HIV prevention. Trivializing or rationalizing the dangers of meth and high risk sexual behavior is clearly not consistent with the mission of HHS. The Department should be focused instead on efforts to prevent substance abuse and other high risk behaviors and exploring improved treatment options for those suffering meth addiction or living with HIV and hepatitis C.

In case you are unaware of HHS' support for this conference, you can obtain more information on-line at <http://harmredux.org/conference2005.html>.

In an effort for us to better understand the role of HHS in support of this conference, we ask that you provide to us the following by the close of business August 26, 2005:

- (1) The total cost to HHS associated with sponsorship of this conference;
 - (2) An explanation as to why HHS is sponsoring this conference;
 - (3) A detailed explanation of the department's views on the concepts being promoted at this conference that meth abuse should be accepted as "a right of passage" and promotion of condom use is no longer effective as HIV prevention; and
 - (4) A list of names and titles of all HHS employees attending this conference.
- Thank you for attention to this matter. We look forward to a prompt reply.

Sincerely,

U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley (R-IO)
U.S. Senator Sam Brownback (R-KS)
U.S. Senator Mike DeWine (R-OH)
U.S. Senator Jim Inhofe (R-OK)
U.S. Senator Tom Coburn, M.D. (R-OK)
U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC)